

Have Yourself a Merry Little X'mas

By Dr Oh Jen Jen, Editorial Board Member

As yet another festive season draws near, many of us in the medical profession will no doubt look forward to spending this time with our loved ones, while some remain in the hospitals, either willingly or unwillingly, to cover night duties.

Like my fellow medical officer (MO), Dr John Chiam, I too have reflected often on the many human dramas being played out by my patients on a daily basis. But these incidents somehow become all the more significant during Christmas, when a joyous occasion may turn into tragedy, or vice versa.

I'm certain that all of us will agree that, in the course of our work, no 2 Christmases are ever exactly alike, which can be both a curse and a blessing. And as I look back on my career so far, I realise how vastly different all of them have been.

1999

I was a house officer (HO) in the Department of Medicine at Changi General Hospital (CGH). And like all medical postings in Singapore, it was mentally and physically demanding. In fact, Medicine is considered a rite of passage for interns, because if you can survive this, you can survive anything.

As fate would have it, I was rostered for a Christmas Eve call, which didn't really bother me as I didn't celebrate it at the time. And it would've been a relatively good call, if I hadn't eaten a plate of contaminated ham from the pantry (meals were provided by the hospital then). It was most probably a case of *Staph. aureus* gastroenteritis, as my symptoms came upon me like a tidal wave precisely 4 hours after ingesting the meal. 2 hours later, when I still felt like I'd been hit by a train, I called my fellow HO to help me clerk a new case, only to hear him say he was also starting to feel nauseous, after which he dropped the telephone

receiver, ran to the bathroom and suffered a fate similar to mine.

The remaining healthy houseman spent the rest of the night gallantly covering passive work for both of us, while our MOs kindly agreed to clerk all the new cases. It wasn't that much fun at the time, but whenever I recount the event with the other unfortunate victim (who's now an MO in the polyclinic), it never fails to make us laugh.

2000

This time round, I was an MO in the Department of Haematology at the Singapore General Hospital. In addition to shouldering more responsibilities, my contact with patients increased tenfold as I did numerous passive haematology calls, and attended to people who were extremely sickly and often admitted for months at a time.

It was especially difficult during Christmas, when we faced bone marrow transplant patients suffering from gut-wrenching rejection reactions, or watched healthy young athletes get struck down by leukaemia and spend their holidays in the ward, vomiting and purging in response to chemotherapy. Even with improved treatment regimens, the mortality rate remains high, and I signed a substantial number of death certificates during my 6-month stint. But it's almost surreal at times, when you run past brightly lit Christmas trees in the corridor, only to enter a bare and undecorated isolation room and proceed to perform CPR on the lifeless figure lying on the bed. It gets even worse when you realise that many patients with leukaemia don't smoke, drink alcohol, or partake in risky behaviour.

It was a sobering experience, one that left me contemplating the injustices of life on a regular basis. Christmas that year was a far cry from the previous one,

but thankfully, none since then has quite equalled or surpassed it.

2001

As part of the Department of General Surgery at CGH, I witnessed much of the after-effects of excessive enjoyment during this period. We had our fair share of Mallory-Weiss tears and gastritis from alcohol consumption, stable head injuries and facial fractures from drunken brawls, as well as cases at the other end of the spectrum: victims of blood-curdling road traffic accidents who bled out and perished on the operating table – some of them guilty of driving under the influence, others innocent passengers or pedestrians. On the other hand, everyone managed to get some rest, as patients postponed or sometimes outright refused operations because they didn't want to spend their holidays confined to their beds. Best of all, as is the case with all surgical departments, the food was plentiful, delicious, and thoroughly enjoyed.

2002

Currently, I'm in the Department of Medicine at CGH, this time returning as an MO. It's good to see some familiar faces, and to be remembered (hopefully in a good way!). I'm now covering the medical intensive care unit till the end of the year, and considering my affinity for emergency medicine, the ICU posting is right up my alley.

However, our patients are invariably seriously ill, and no matter how much experience I've acquired in invasive procedures and resuscitations, I'm still not quite prepared for the outpouring of grief whenever a death occurs. In the past few weeks, mortalities have ranged from the relatively young to the very old, from sudden collapses to long drawn-out illnesses.

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Recently, a woman in her 40s died from a pulmonary embolism, after surviving 7 asystolic events (from which she was successfully revived with IV Adrenaline). It was the first time I witnessed someone expire right in front of me, then dramatically awaken after being jabbed with this wonder drug. It was even more heart-breaking to see her open her eyes and smile at us after each episode, only to drift into oblivion later when her heart stopped yet again. We tried very hard, in part

because her sister was rushing back from Australia to see her. But in the end, her brother asked us to stop so she could pass away peacefully.

This family's Christmas will no doubt involve much grieving, but being Christians, they also believe that she has gone to a better place. And being a newly converted Christian myself, it is a conviction that helps lighten a burden that can at times seem unbearable.

Who knows what my future Christmases will be like? Before I know

it, I'll be spending them in the Accident & Emergency Department, stitching lacerations inflicted by broken beer bottles, or inserting chest tubes into yet another victim of a drunk driver. It may not always be the season to be jolly, but medicine, like life, is always full of surprises. So while some events may make us question our faith and ask "Why?", others reaffirm it so strongly that we wonder why we ever doubted at all.

Here's wishing everyone a very Merry Christmas this year. ■